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ABSTRACT

Information on male linkage is usually generalized from studies of female linkage and the saliency of the father-son tie in later life is unclear. The importance of the father-son tie was examined in 56 men aged 65 and older through a comparative analysis designed to compare the levels of association and helping between fathers and sons to those of other parent-child dyads and to determine factors contributing to the frequency of association and helping between older fathers and sons. Association was determined by asking the fathers to indicate the extent to which they had gotten together with their sons of most contact during the past year, and the extent to which they had received telephone calls and letters from their sons. Help received was measured by asking the fathers the extent to which they had received help in 10 areas of assistance from their sons during the past year. Help given was determined by rephrasing the helping question in terms of the amount of help that fathers had given to sons. Five independent variables were also included in the analysis: proximity to son, self-perceived health, perceived adequacy of income, number of children, and confidants. The results revealed that social structural factors and subjective and self-motives were relatively unimportant to the interaction between fathers and sons except in the case of association where contact increased with proximity to son. The results showed the father-son tie to be less salient than the mother-daughter tie in relation to association and parent to child help but, otherwise, of similar saliency to other parent-child dyads. These findings suggest that the father-son tie is of moderate functional importance as viewed through association and of low import in terms of help received and given. (NRB)

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Fathers and Sons in Later Life:

The Saliency of the Tie

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the importance of the father-son tie through a comparative analysis of association, help given, and help received of four parent-child dyads. Factors contributing to interaction between older fathers and sons were also examined through a convergent symbolic-interaction/exchange theory perspective. Respondents were 56 rural and urban men, 65 years or older, selected through an area cluster sampling strategy. Social structural factors and subjective and self-motives were relatively non-important to the interaction between fathers and sons except in the case of association. The findings suggest the father-son tie to be of moderate functional importance as viewed through association and low import in terms of help received and given.

KEY WORDS: AFFINAL KIN, ASSOCIATION, HELPING, FATHERS, SONS, FAMILY SOLIDARITY, OLDER FATHERS, PARENT-CHILD, INTERGENERATIONAL

FATHERS AND SONS IN LATER LIFE: THE SALIENCY OF THE TIE

(RESEARCH REPORT)

The saliency of the father-son tie in later life is unclear. Information on male linkage, in the main, must be generalized from studies of female linkage which imply the relative unimportance of male relationships (Lee, 1980; Schorr, 1980; Streib & Beck, 1980; Troll, 1971). Women, reportedly, live closer to significant kin, interact to a greater extent with relatives, engage more frequently in patterns of mutual aid, and show greater levels of affect toward kin than men.

Several factors appear to explain the significance of female-linked ties in the kin network. Findings by Adams (1968) showed the importance of reciprocity to the mother-daughter bond. Borrowing from exchange theory, he explained the greater potential for reciprocal acts between mothers and daughters than mothers and sons as a contributing factor to mother-daughter closeness. Similarly, Troll (1971) concluded that whereas women's relationship with their mothers is based upon shared activity and affection, men see the relationship with parents as obligating and feel less close. Affinal kin possibly may serve to weaken parent-son ties. It has been observed, for example, that sons tend to transfer their allegiances and obligations from their family of orientation to that of their wife's (Troll, 1971). Possibly impacting this observation is the "avoidance hypothesis," or the posit that due to their potential successor role, daughters-in-law are sometimes "avoided" or discounted by mothers-in-law. This behavior, in turn, may serve to further reduce interaction and affect between sons and mothers, and possibly, sons and fathers.

The purposes of the present study were twofold: (1) to compare the levels of association and helping between fathers and sons to those of other parent-child dyads, and (2) to determine the factors contributing to the frequency of

association and helping between older fathers and sons. The first hypothesis stated that fathers and sons would have significantly lower levels of association and helping than other parent-child dyads. Secondly, it was hypothesized that, based upon a theoretical perspective converging symbolic interaction and exchange theory, social structural factors and subjective and self-motives would explain a significant amount of variance in the association and helping (interactive) behaviors between older fathers and sons.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for the present study is based upon a review of the literature suggesting the greater relative strength of the mother/daughter tie to that of other parent-child dyads [Atkinson, Kivett, & Campbell (in press); Lee, 1980; Streib & Beck, 1980] and an adaptation of a theoretical perspective of intergenerational interaction which integrates exchange principles and symbolic interaction tenets (Mutran & Reitzes, 1984). Mutran and Reitzes' convergence of perspectives is based upon the premise that social background and related roles, subjective meaning and self-feelings, as well as exchange processes influence the interaction of adult children and their elderly parents. Although divergent in their approaches, exchange theory and symbolic interaction theory both seek to explain social interaction. The convergence perspective as projected by Mutran and Reitzes (1984) suggests three aspects of development in the study of intergenerational family roles: (1) the impact of social structure on family interaction; (2) the impact of subjective and self-motives on interaction; and (3) the relationship of exchange and interaction to feelings among the elderly. Since the main objectives of the current study were to determine factors contributing to intergenerational interaction and not the

impact of balance of exchanges on the subjective well-being of fathers, this latter posit was not incorporated into the design of the study.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The data used in this research were from a larger study of the kin network system of 321 adults 65 years or older living in a rural-transitional area in the Southeast. Subjects were selected using an area cluster sampling strategy. Information was gathered from the subjects in their homes. The data included: demographic information; income; health; morale; and relationship with children, grandchildren, in-laws, and collateral kin. Subjects were asked to respond to questions with regard to kin of most contact in each of seven levels. For purposes of this study, the major respondents of interest were men who indicated that their child of most contact was a son (N=56).

Measures

The dependent variables in the study were association, help given, and help received. Association was determined by asking the father to indicate the extent to which he had gotten together with the son of most contact during the past year. The listing consisted of 12 activities (Table 1). Also added to this scale was the extent to which the father had received telephone calls and letters from the son. A nine-point response scale was used ranging from daily to never. Cronbach's alpha for reliability for the association scale was .69. Help received was measured by asking the fathers the extent to which they had received help in 10 areas of assistance from their sons during the last year. The same response schedule as that used with the association measure was employed. The reliability coefficient for the scale was .80. Help given was

determined by rephrasing the helping question in terms of the amount of help that fathers had given to sons. Cronbach's alpha of reliability was .76.

Five independent variables were included in the analyses. The first four of these variables, proximity to son, self-perceived health, perceived adequacy of income, and number of children were social structural factors, which according to Mutran and Reitzes (1984), either create an opportunity for, or limit, the interaction of elderly parents. These factors are seen to provide different sets of opportunities or constraints on bargaining--a concept basic to exchange theory. Proximity to son was a functional measure of distance between the residence of father and son. Responses were on a scale of 1-6, ranging from live in the same house to one day or more away. Health was a self-report measure in which the respondent was asked how he would rate his health on a scale of 0-9. The best of health was represented by the top of the scale and the poorest of health was represented by the bottom.

Perceived adequacy of income was measured through responses to the question, "How adequate is your income? - always adequate, adequate most of the time, adequate if careful, and never adequate." Number of children was the total number of living children including natural, foster, and adoptive offspring. The final variable, confidant, represented a subjective factor. According to Mutran and Reitzes (1984), in line with symbolic interaction tenets, positive subjective meanings attached to a kinsperson (such as that of confidant) will increase intergenerational interaction. Thus the meaning attached to a child is seen to influence the receptiveness of an older parent to give or receive aid or to associate with a child. The confidant variable was measured by asking the respondents if they had a confidant and who that person was in terms of their relationship to them. The confidant variable was dichotomized into a dummy variable, son vs. other, with the son category serving as the referent.

Statistical Analyses

The first hypothesis which stated that fathers and sons would have lower levels of association and helping than other parent-child dyads was tested by one-way analysis of variance. The Scheffe test was used for multiple comparison of means and a conservative level of .01 was used to confirm significance. The second hypothesis that social structural factors and subjective and self-motives would explain a significant amount of variance in association and helping behaviors between fathers and sons was analyzed through three hierarchial multiple regression analyses (the alpha level used to confirm significance was .05). The social structural variables of proximity to son, health, perceived adequacy of income, and number of children were included as a block in the first step of the analysis. The subjective measure of confident was entered on the second and final step. Other supporting variables including three measures of affect were analyzed through descriptive methods. Association, help received, and help given served as a dependent measure in each of the three regression models.

FINDINGS

Descriptive

The mean age of fathers was 72.76 years (SD = 5.59) and they had an average of 2.07 daughters and 1.94 sons. The majority, 91.1%, were white and married, 87.5%. Most fathers were retired, 85.7%, and had been either craftsmen or operatives, 60.7%. They had a mean educational level of 8.65 years (SD = 3.51) and a self-rated health mean of 6.13 (SD = 2.52). Fathers, 83.9%, most frequently said that they always or usually had enough money to meet their needs. The majority, 91.1%, reported that they had a confidant. Of those reporting a confidant, approximately 80% named their spouse and 5% mentioned a

son. The mean age of sons of most contact was 41.35 (SD = 9.24) years and they had a mean educational level of 12.70 years (SD = 3.41). Approximately one-half of the sons of most contact lived within 60 minutes of the father.

Three items measured affect between fathers and sons. The first two questions, related to extent to which fathers "got along" or "felt close" to sons and each had four Likert-type responses. Fathers, 96.4%, usually indicated that they got along very well with their son of most contact, and the same percentage reported feeling very close. The third item of affect related to common life views. Fathers were asked to indicate on a scale of 0-9 the extent to which they and their sons had similar views regarding life. The overall mean was 8.32 (SD = 0.86).

Inferential Results

Dyad comparisons. Table 1 shows that in only one comparison, mothers and daughters, did fathers and sons show lower levels of association. Fathers and sons were most likely to have been associated during the past year through visiting, telephoning, and happy occasions such as birthdays and other special events. The order of frequency of type of association was similar for all parent-child dyads. Similarly, differences in help received were found between father/son and mother/daughter dyads, yet in no other parent-child comparisons. Fathers showed significantly lower levels of help received from sons than mothers from daughters (Table 2). Only moderate to low help was received by fathers from sons and assistance was most likely to have been with transportation, household repairs, car care, yardwork, help in illness, and with decision making. Both fathers and mothers were most likely to have received help with transportation from their son or daughter. Mothers, however, received considerably more help from daughters than fathers received from sons. The type of assistance in other areas differed. Largest discrepancies appeared to be in

traditionally male or female role-related areas, for example, shopping, housekeeping, and health care. A notable discrepancy was also seen in the larger extent to which mothers received help in decision making from daughters. No significant differences were found in the amount of help given by fathers to sons and other parent-child dyads (Table 3). However, mothers reported giving more assistance to daughters than to sons. Fathers, approximately one-third, were most likely to have provided transportation to sons than other services. Overall, amount of assistance given to sons was low and less than that received from sons with the possible exception of transportation. On the basis of these observations, hypothesis one was rejected since fathers and sons did not show lower levels of association and helping than all other parent-child dyads. Only in the case of association (mothers and daughters) and help given by children (mothers and daughters) were differences observed.

[Tables 1, 2, and 3 about here]

Variance explained in association and helping behaviors. Examination of the results of the first regression analysis showed the model to explain a significant amount of variance in father-son association, R^2=.13, F (5,47)=2.55, $p < .05$ (Table 4). Proximity to son, a social structural variable, was the only factor contributing to the frequency with which fathers and sons associated. Contact with fathers increased with sons' proximity to fathers. The subjective factor, confidant, was of no relative importance to how often fathers and sons got together. The results from the two remaining regression analyses were non-significant, that is, social structural and subjective variables did not explain a significant amount of variance in either help received by fathers, $R^2 = .10$, F (5,47) = 2.12, $p > .05$; or help given to sons, $R^2 = -.02$, F (5,46) = .76, $p > .05$. The inferential findings only supported, in part, the hypothesis that social structural factors and subjective and self-motives would explain a

significant amount of interaction between fathers and sons. Only in the case of association was this observed. As a result, the second hypothesis was also rejected.

[Table 4 about here]

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show the father/son tie to be less salient than the mother/daughter tie in relation to association and parent to child help but, otherwise, of similar saliency to other parent-child dyads. The data indicate the difficulty in identifying factors contributing to the father-son tie in later life, at least from a symbolic interaction/exchange theory perspective. Only a small, but significant, amount of variance could be explained in the interaction between fathers and sons and only in the area of association. Moderately high levels of association were observed between fathers and sons in obligatory areas such as visiting, special occasions, and telephoning but levels of help (both given and received) were generally low. The data suggest the relative lack of importance of social structural variables, or factors theoretically fostering or limiting intergenerational interactions, as well as subjective and self-motives in the interaction patterns of fathers and sons. Social structural factors either contributing to or impacting interaction, such as in the case of association, were limited to a variable of convenience or accessibility, residential proximity, rather than to ones representing dependency needs or resources of the father. The subjective attachment assigned the son, confidant, had no relationship to rates of interaction as observed through association and helping. As a result, the data failed to fully support recent premises of Mutran and Reitzes (1984) regarding the importance of

symbolic interaction and exchange theory principles to intergenerational interaction.

Positive affect toward sons as observed through expressions of closeness, getting along, and through similarity of life views was quite high. The data support earlier observations that women are more likely to interact with relatives and to engage more frequently in mutual aid than men (Adams, 1968; Lee, 1980; Streib & Beck, 1980). Examination of the types of association and helping between parent-child dyads in the present study suggests greater potential for mutual interests between mothers and daughters based upon traditionally sex-related interests, as well as greater opportunity for reciprocal exchanges. The study shows, for example, more sex-related activities available to mothers and daughters than to other parent-child dyads. Examples were seen in areas in which large sex-linked discrepancies occurred such as shopping, health care, home recreation, and transportation. Also, helping behaviors showed greater potential for reciprocity for mothers and daughters than for other groups. Reciprocity, a basic component of exchange theory, has been identified as an important factor in intergenerational helping behaviors (Adams, 1968). The observation of stronger mother/daughter ties could also be related to the socioeconomic characteristics of the sample (Streib & Beck, 1980). That is, strong sex-linked relationships have been observed among working class families. The female "kin-tending" phenomenon also appeared to be present through the greater frequency with which mothers and daughters were associated through emergencies and help in illness. The data appeared to support earlier observations of the obligatory nature of sons' relationships with older parents. Association between fathers and sons, for example, was generally greater for activities suggesting a sense of duty such as visiting, getting together for happy occasions (e.g., birthdays), family reunions,

emergencies, and telephoning. Assistance provided fathers by sons was also more likely to be of essential types such as transportation and health care. Association and types of assistance that were discretionary in nature were less likely to have occurred.

In conclusion, the results of the present study contribute to the paucity of information on the father-son relationship in later life while also providing continuing evidence of the lack of clarity of the father/son relationship. The findings support general observations of the greater relative importance of female ties in intergenerational association and helping. The data suggest the father/son tie to be of moderate functional importance to intergenerational interaction in later life as viewed through association. The father/son tie would appear to have only low functional importance, however, in terms of the amount of help that fathers receive from sons. Furthermore, fathers are an infrequent source of help to adult sons. Sons' interaction with older fathers is primarily based upon its obligatory or essential nature. Not measured by this study is the amount of contact or assistance that may occur within the father/son dyad via the daughter-in-law. A paucity of information suggests, however, that the "asymmetry principle" in kin tending in our society among wives would not lend strong support to this projection. Generalizations from this study should be made with the acknowledgement that respondents reported on interaction with sons of most contact. As a result, relationships with sons of moderate or no contact were excluded and observations represented maximal levels of father/son interaction.

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TABLE 1. ASSOCIATION BETWEEN OLDER PARENT AND CHILD OF MOST CONTACT ACCORDING TO SEX OF PARENT AND CHILD

Association	Fathers/ sons[a]			Fathers/ daughters[b]			Mothers/ daughters[c]			Mothers/ sons[d]		
	%	M	SD	%	M	SD	%	M	SD	%	M	SD
Commercial recreation	21	1.6	1.3	33	1.6	1.1	23	1.6	1.3	9	1.3	0.9
Home recreation	36	2.4	2.1	46	2.5	1.8	51	3.0	2.3	37	2.4	2.0
Outdoor recreation	25	1.9	2.0	25	1.8	1.5	22	1.7	1.6	17	1.6	1.6
Visiting	89	5.5	2.9	85	5.8	2.6	83	6.1	2.8	83	6.0	2.8
Vacation	27	1.6	1.0	27	1.7	1.2	32	1.8	1.3	23	1.5	1.2
Family reunion	45	1.9	1.2	54	2.3	1.3	55	2.3	1.3	50	2.1	1.2
Emergency	36	2.0	1.8	38	1.8	1.1	57	2.1	1.3	35	2.0	1.9
Working together	5	1.1	0.6	4	1.2	1.2	5	1.3	1.3	4	1.1	0.5
Babysitting	5	1.2	0.9	13	1.6	1.8	18	1.8	2.0	8	1.4	1.3
Happy occasions	82	3.3	1.2	75	3.2	1.4	94	3.8	1.1	83	3.8	1.4
Church	52	3.2	2.6	43	3.1	2.6	62	3.7	2.5	51	3.5	2.8
Shopping	27	1.9	1.8	35	2.3	2.0	75	4.1	2.2	31	2.3	2.1
Writing	58	3.2	2.3	60	3.1	2.1	62	3.4	2.4	46	2.8	2.3
Telephoning	85	6.0	2.6	92	7.1	2.5	90	7.0	2.5	87	6.5	2.6
Range		16-73			17-63			17-83			18-73	
Means		37.73			40.00			44.23[e]			38.42	

[a] $n = 56$.
[b] $n = 98$.
[c] $n = 94$.
[d] $n = 79$.
[e] Significantly higher than father/sons, mothers/sons ($p < .01$).

TABLE 2. HELP RECEIVED: BY OLDER FATHERS AND MOTHERS ACCORDING TO SEX OF CHILD OF MOST CONTACT

Help Received	Fathers/sons[a]			Fathers/daughters[b]			Mothers/daughters[c]			Mothers/sons[d]		
	%	M	SD	%	M	SD	%	M	SD	%	M	SD
Transportation	39	2.5	2.0	60	3.6	2.5	80	5.0	2.5	58	3.6	2.6
Household repair	30	2.0	1.6	28	2.0	1.9	40	2.4	2.1	47	2.9	2.4
Housekeeping	11	1.4	1.1	44	3.0	2.6	53	3.2	2.6	17	1.9	2.2
Shopping	16	1.7	1.7	45	3.0	2.5	71	4.3	2.6	23	2.2	2.3
Yardwork	27	2.1	2.0	19	1.7	1.7	30	2.2	2.1	41	2.8	2.4
Car care	25	1.8	1.6	11	1.3	0.9	11	1.4	1.1	29	2.1	2.0
Illness	32	2.3	2.3	60	3.5	2.8	61	3.6	2.8	37	2.7	2.5
Decision making	30	1.8	1.3	32	2.2	2.1	65	3.7	2.5	47	2.9	2.4
Legal aid	5	1.2	0.7	11	1.5	1.6	18	1.5	1.2	12	1.4	1.4
Financial aid	2	1.0	0.3	7	1.2	1.0	16	1.6	1.5	13	1.5	1.6
Range		10-46			10-52			10-74			10-90	
Means		18.75			23.81			29.38[e]			24.68	

[a] $\underline{n} = 56$.
[b] $\underline{n} = 48$.
[c] $\underline{n} = 94$.
[d] $\underline{n} = 79$.
[e] Significantly higher than fathers/sons ($p < .01$).

TABLE 3. HELP GIVEN BY OLDER FATHERS AND MOTHERS ACCORDING TO SEX OF CHILD OF MOST CONTACT

Help Given	Fathers/sons[a]			Fathers/daughters[b]			Mothers/daughters[c]			Mothers/sons[d]		
	%	M	SD	%	M	SD	%	M	SD	%	M	SD
Transportation	31	2.0	1.8	40	2.4	2.0	25	2.0	1.9	12	1.4	1.2
Household repairs	18	1.5	1.2	19	1.5	1.2	5	1.2	0.9	47	2.9	2.4
Housekeeping	2	1.0	0.3	8	1.4	1.6	22	2.0	2.3	17	1.9	2.2
Shopping	11	1.4	1.3	15	1.6	1.6	30	2.2	2.0	23	2.2	2.3
Yardwork	13	1.4	1.0	6	1.2	0.7	4	1.2	1.0	41	2.8	2.4
Car care	11	1.3	0.8	4	1.1	0.6	2	1.1	0.4	29	2.1	2.0
Illness	15	1.4	1.2	19	1.6	1.5	33	2.1	2.1	37	2.7	2.5
Decision making	22	1.6	1.5	19	1.5	1.1	29	1.9	1.5	47	2.9	2.4
Legal aid[e]	-	1.0	0.0	-	-	-	6	1.1	0.4	12	1.4	1.4
Financial aid	6	1.2	1.2	10	1.4	1.4	15	1.3	1.1	13	1.5	1.6
Range		10-45			10-33			10-43			10-50	
Means		14.93			15.77			17.07[f]			13.28	

[a] $n = 56$.
[b] $n = 48$.
[c] $n = 94$.
[d] $n = 79$.
[e] Blanks denote less than one percent.
[f] Significantly higher than mothers/sons ($p < .01$).

TABLE 4. REGRESSION OF ASSOCATION UPON PROXIMITY TO SON: HEALTH, PERCEIVED ADEQUACY OF INCOME, AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITY OF FATHERS, AND CHILD AS A CONFIDANT

Independent Variables	B	t
Social structural		
Number of children	.02	.14
Perceived adequacy of income	-.11	-.76
Self-reported health	.23	1.60
Proximity to son	.34[a]	2.48
Subjective		
Confidant	-.14	-.99

R^2(adjusted)= .13.
[F (5,47) = 2.55, $p < .05$).]

[a] $p < .05$.